# Father Lacombe

By GRACE YEOWARD SCHIERHOLTZ

Love's labor not lost

Condensed from the *Magnificat**

Father Albert Lacombe is more than a legend in the Canadian West. He was born in 1827, near Montreal, the eldest of seven children. His father was a farmer in a modest way, but there was always enough to eat, and enough clothing for the big family.

The two heroes of the boy's childhood were the old curé, Monsieur de Veaux, and his granduncle, Joseph Lacombe, a fur trader. He wanted to be a priest, and he wanted to travel the distant trails of the fur trader. The two ambitions seemed poles apart, but Albert Lacombe welded them into his life work.

As a newly ordained priest, barely 22 years old, Father Lacombe left Montreal for the West, the words of his teacher ringing in his ears, "If God is with you, who can be against you?" He reached Dubuque, Iowa, in time for the celebration of the feast of the Assumption, and there he preached his first sermon that Sunday. From Dubuque he went north by steamboat to St. Paul, then a trading post of 30 log buildings. From St. Paul he traveled by oxcart brigade to Pembina, N. D., on the Manitoba border. The 400-mile trip north from St. Paul took 60 days! He arrived just in time for the annual buffalo hunt.

No sooner had he reached Pembina than Father Lacombe started to learn Saulteaux, one of the Algonquin dialects, and from then to the end of his long life, the Indians and their languages never lost their fascination for him. He remained at Pembina a year, pleading the while to be sent on west. Then he went back to Montreal for a brief visit and the next spring his petition was granted: he was assigned to the Fort Edmonton mission. Edmonton is now the capital of Alberta.

He went up the North Saskatchewan river on the boat that took in the year's provisions. He soon discovered that the fort itself was the one bit of civilization in the country; that everything else was as primitive as it had been hundreds of years before.

Fort Edmonton might be the nearest to Montreal that Father Lacombe had been since he left home, but little of his work was done there, for his territory was about 700 miles square. All the first winter he studied Cree, jotting down notes that became the backbone of a dictionary he compiled later on. Although it is a different dialect, he found to his delight that his slight knowledge of Saulteaux helped him in mastering it.

Father Lacombe ministered to white men and Indians alike, and became proficient in the Cree tongue. He traveled the length and breadth of his parish; he learned to handle a dog team; to

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make himself a bed by his sleigh in a blizzard; how to run river rapids in a light canoe; and how to live off the land if necessary, on berries and fish in the summer and on game in the winter.

He was received coldly by many of the Indians, especially the Blackfeet, who were absolute pagans. For a long time he despaired of ever reaching this tribe. Then one winter day there came a frantic message asking him to hurry to a tribe some 200 miles south. His friends urged him not to go, for the Blackfoot territory had never been safe for any white man, priest or trader, or for any other Indian tribe.

Father Lacombe gave no heed to his well-meaning friends. He hitched up his dogs and started for enemy territory. It was bitterly cold, more than 50° below zero, and several times he was lost in a blizzard. It took him three weeks to reach the Blackfoot camp, where he found 60 tents of sick and dying Indians.

Scarlet fever! The priest had learned something of medicine, and he went to work with his pitifully small supply of remedies. Night and day he labored, from tent to tent, here performing a burial service, there trying to ease some sufferer. For 20 days he scarcely ate or slept, and just as he saw the epidemic beginning to subside, he himself was stricken. The fierce Blackfeet chiefs became gentle as women as they nursed him back to health.

It would be wonderful to say that the heathen Blackfeet underwent a change of heart. They didn't, not altogether, at least, but from that day on they had a deep reverence for the priest's religion that bore abundant fruit later on. Towards the end of that summer, one of the Blackfoot chiefs, dressed in his most impressive regalia, a feathered headdress, beaded buckskin suit, and war paint, came to Edmonton to ask for a priest. He promised that as long as the priest stayed, his people would refrain from making war on their Cree enemies.

Father Lacombe was not only a missionary, he was an empire builder. As he waded the dangerous Sturgeon river near his mission one day, he decided that too much time was being wasted at the ford, especially when there were weeks in the spring and fall when the river could not be crossed at all. He would build a bridge! He started that very day. White and red men looked on in doubt. There wasn't a bridge west of the Great Lakes. Father Lacombe disdained their doubts, and requested their help. When a number declared that it would be wasted effort, the priest told them, "Those who do not help shall not use the bridge."

The doubters then took heed. If the bridge was a success, it would be dreadful if they could not use it. So they pitched in, and the bridge came into being: strong, sturdy, well-built, ready for the heaviest oxcart. For years it was the only bridge from the Great Lakes to the Pacific ocean. Like youngsters with a new toy, the Indians spent days crossing and recrossing it. They even pitched tents there until one brave was caught lighting a camp fire in the mid-

dle of it. After that, Father Lacombe had to insist that they make camp at least 50 feet from the precious bridge.

At Edmonton, in 1862, Father Lacombe opened the first school west of Winnipeg, with an Oblate novice, Father Scollin, as teacher. Twenty children of Hudson Bay Company families were the first pupils. He also built a grist mill, a hospital, and a home for the nursing nuns whom he persuaded to come. He begged seeds in the East and taught the Indians how to farm. His dream was to make his parish self-supporting, to grow grain and millet, vegetables, and flowers.

Father Lacombe's generosity became a byword in the West. He gave everything away, clothes, food, canoes, dog teams. He never had two of anything, for no sooner did he stock up than he gave away the extras—he could not bear to see anyone, white or Indian, with less than he had himself.

When he reached an Indian encampment, he would set up a little portable chapel and begin the day with Mass. After breakfast, he taught the women catechism, prayers, and hymns. In the afternoon, he worked with the children. In the evening the braves gathered in his tent.

Whenever disease struck an Indian camp, scarlet fever, typhoid, smallpox, the first thought was to call Father Lacombe, who never failed to answer. Once when he was rushing out of Edmonton to reach a mission 200 miles east, where he had an important appointment with a friend, he came upon an Indian woman with a half-frozen papoose. He revived her, built a blazing fire, gave her food, and most of his blankets. They made their way 100 miles back to Edmonton, where he left the woman in the care of the kindly Sisters. Without stopping to rest, he retraced his steps; his deed of kindness had doubled the length of his difficult journey on snowshoes.

On another trip, storms delayed his party until their food gave out and they were forced to boil and eat their moccasins. Father Lacombe made light of the near tragedy. "If we had had a pinch or two of salt, the moccasins wouldn't have made a bad meal at all," he said.

In 1870, smallpox swept the plains and all summer Father Lacombe worked among the sick and dying, never giving a thought to his own danger. In September, the epidemic waned and the priest sadly counted the toll: over 3,000 Cree and Blackfeet dead. Many an Indian who had scorned the priest's teaching now turned a more willing ear. His heroism, his untiring devotion, at last bore fruit. The red men talked at their councils, and decided that a person who would live for 20 years among them, who would nurse them back to health at the risk of his own, must have some message they should hear. That fall, over 2,000 adults and children were baptized, among them the head man of all the Crees, Chief Sweetgrass. Nothing in his long years of service gave the Father more happiness than to baptize his old friend and band of followers.

With his every waking minute filled

with more work than two could do, one would expect Father Lacombe to have long since forgotten his Cree dictionary. But he had made notes steadily over the years, sometimes on paper, sometimes on birch bark, and several times when he had neither pencil, paper nor bark, he burned words and symbols on his sleigh box, to copy later into his diary. In 1871, he had the dictionary printed, as well as a book of sermons in Cree.

More and more white settlers came as the years went on, and lawlessness came with them. Father Lacombe was one of those who asked the Canadian government for some system of law and order on the plains. As a result the Mounties were formed. After the Riel Rebellion of 1885, it was to Father Lacombe that his Cree friends surrendered. He persuaded them to make peace and to accept treaty money from the Great White Mother, as they called Queen Victoria.

Civilization was sweeping towards the plains faster than anyone expected, and one day word came that a railway would soon be built across Canada. When the Canadian Pacific Railway company planned its road through the Gleichen reservation, 50 miles east of Calgary, the surveyors found themselves blocked by the Indian chiefs, who bluntly refused to allow them to build.

The engineers were about ready to give up, start a new survey, and send word to the head office that the transcontinental railway would be delayed at least a year when someone suddenly thought of Father Lacombe. He was hastily summoned.

Their faith in the missionary was not in vain. For two days and nights he talked with the chiefs in their tents and finally came out with the welcome statement that the railway could go through. Several years later, when the Canadian Pacific built a line between Edmonton and Calgary, they named one of the towns Lacombe.

Once when the squatter rights of his people were threatened, and they were told that they would be evicted, Father Lacombe made a hurried trip to Ottawa. When the minister of the interior tried to sidestep the problem, saying he would look into the matter and issue titles later if he found that he should, the priest calmly told him that he would wait right there on the hall floor to be ready to take the titles when they were completed. The minister then lost no time in granting the reasonable request. He rushed the titles through and Father Lacombe did not have to camp in the hall.

The West was being settled fast, and to Father Lacombe came his last vision: a home for the aged, where the men who had worked for the country could spend their declining years in tranquility. He drew plans, and although he was aghast at the cost estimate, he did not give up.

He got the money. The famous Pat Burns of Calgary gave him 200 acres. The home was built on this choice site, just south of the city, a lasting monument to its founder. Men came to live their sunset years beneath its sheltering

roof in comfort and Christian peace.

Father Lacombe was faced with the problem of upkeep of the home. Nothing daunted, he sallied forth again. Big coal companies sent carloads of coal, meat-packing concerns sent meat, vegetables came in car lots, and money, too, appeared. Catholic and Protestant alike contributed to the last dream of the West's Grand Old Man. Father Lacombe saw the home a successful institution before his death in 1916.

## *Brother Toad and Brother Lizard*

The character in this story is a nun who is a musician. Many years ago, as a young Sister, she was a mission worker in the Sioux Indian country, where she played and taught music and did many other things. In the moonlit western nights she used to slip out to the little mission chapel and play the organ.

It was not many nights before the others at the mission noticed that she had an audience—hundreds of desert toads. At the sound of the music, they came from behind and under the desert roses and hopped in a converging mass to the open chapel door. The Sister's puppy first flushed them up, and tried to disperse them, but she stopped him.

Sister knew about the toads loving music. In her girlhood days in her home country, she had learned that if she sat on a garden rock and sang tree toads would pop down before her, respectful and attentive; and she had verified the fact that biologists have noticed and set down the love of music by toads and kindred reptiles.

So there, for night after night, she played, not only in respectful address to God but to His small and humble creatures, too. She thought of them as "dear little worshipers"; if she could praise the Lord with her music, then surely they could with their respectful attention. And the night air was full of the perfume of the desert roses.

Then she left the mission and went to many places, in the work of her calling. Now, years later, she is back in a western convent, in country not unlike the Indian mission country. Her voice is musical, and one day recently she noticed two or three small lizards converging on her window sill, regarding her with their silent attention. By now, the lizards come fearlessly up to her; her voice attracts them, and breaks down their caution.

If they ever do not come, she walks down the garden walk and calls, "Where is my little lizard?" One or two or three tiny creatures glide swiftly to her and raise their heads. "Dear creatures of God," she says of them, "wonderfully and beautifully made; I ask them whether they know God made them, and whatever else of the thought comes into my head."

It seems the story is not new after all. There was St. Francis of Assisi.

N. R. Howard in the Cleveland *News* (18 Oct. 43).